

## **Georgia Cracks Down on Chechens**

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A mass round-up of Chechens in Georgia marks a new policy shift by President Shevardnadze's government.

Dozens of Chechen families living in Tbilisi had a rude awakening on the morning of December 7. Before dawn, at around 5 or 6 am, large groups of armed policemen burst into apartments and homes in different parts of the Georgian capital.

"They hammered on the door, got people straight out of their beds and took them away," Mamed Ediev, a Chechen writer detained in the raids, told IWPR. "And imagine how embarrassed we felt in front of our neighbours, who came outside because of the noise - and there we were looking as though we'd been exposed as bandits and terrorists."

A few hours later, the Georgian interior ministry said that the detentions were part of a planned anti-terrorist operation that was not specifically aimed at Chechens.

"Work is going on in the country to expose foreign citizens who are illegally living here and it is complete disinformation to suggest that we are in any way singling out Chechens," Paata Gomelauri, head of the ministry's press service, told journalists.

Intelligence service chief Avtandil Ioseliani said the security forces were moving to thwart plans by resident foreigners to "destabilise" Georgia. He said the threat remains, despite the raids.

Relations between Georgia and the separatist government in Chechnya, once excellent, have deteriorated in recent months. Georgia took in 4,000 refugees fleeing the second Chechen campaign that began in 1999 and turned a blind eye to the presence on its territory of rebel fighters.

But after the Moscow theatre siege in October, the Georgians closed down the Tbilisi office of separatist president Aslan Maskhadov.

Under pressure from Moscow, Georgia also decided to extradite to Russia eight of 13 Chechen fighters whom its border guards detained, as they attempted to cross the frontier in August. Five were sent to Russia in October and two weeks ago the Georgians announced that a further three were being extradited.

Since then Chechen rebels have hinted they may retaliate. On December 6, the day before the security swoop, the 24 Hours newspaper received a letter from Chechen field commander Doku Umarov, in which he warned of violence in Georgia if any more fighters were sent to Russia.

On December 9, President Shevardnadze said, "Threats against Georgia come as a big surprise, when this country has done more than anyone for refugees from Chechnya, even though Chechens fought against Georgians in Abkhazia."

The president said the night-time arrests had been carried out because "extremist groups were planning large-scale acts of terrorism in Tbilisi".

However, Akhmed Zakayev, Maskhadov's envoy in London, told IWPR by telephone "there can be no question of any threats from the Chechens against Georgia".

Zakayev said he called on all his compatriots "not to give in to provocations, always to remember that it was in Georgia that several thousand Chechens found salvation and refuge and that that, despite colossal pressure from Russia, Georgia is continuing to give what help it can to Chechen refugees".

The police announced that the 97 foreigners arrested in the December 7 sweep were found not to have Georgian visas. Most of the detainees were Chechens, although they also included citizens of Pakistan, Somalia, Laos and the Philippines.

Interior ministry spokesman Gomelauri said most of those detained had been released, until a decision was made on whether to grant them refugee status or deport them. He said that 12 wanted criminal suspects had been apprehended, 38 crimes solved and a large quantity of weapons seized.

According to human rights activists however, many of those arrested were officially registered as refugees in Georgia or even had Georgian citizenship and included several children.

"The claims by leaders of the law enforcement agencies that the wives and children of the detained Chechens followed them voluntarily to police stations is nothing but a lie," said Nana Kakabadze, head of the NGO Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights.

Kakabadze said that all those arrested, including small children, had their fingerprints taken, as if they were suspects in major crimes. Echoing this, commentaries in several Georgian papers the next day wondered whether Georgia was returning to the Stalinist era.

Monitors who investigated the detentions said the police had violated their own procedures in making the arrests. In many cases, they burst into houses with weapons and made searches, without showing arrest warrants. In the Saburtalo district, they physically threatened a television cameraman from the Caucasia channel and confiscated his camera.

Many Chechens are worried about what will happen next. "Chechen refugees are worried that Georgia's next step could be their mass deportation to Russia," said Surkho Yediev, a journalist who has worked with Chechen migrants.

Some see the crackdown as a deliberate attempt to curry favour with Russia after months of tension between Tbilisi and Moscow.

Hours before the mass arrests, the Georgian authorities said that in an operation in eastern Georgia they had killed four militants from Karachai-Cherkessia in the North Caucasus, who were suspected of involvement in the apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgograd in 1999, in which more than two hundred people died.

The Georgians also said they had wounded Yusup Krymshamkalov, a suspect in the bombings.

Some observers alleged that the Russian security services actually took part in the Tbilisi round-up. The

Georgians deny this, but the interior ministry did admit to US help and receiving "appropriate recommendations from American colleagues". Washington has several hundred military officials in Georgia training Georgian special forces.

Interior ministry spokesman Gomelauri said that the passport and registration operation would soon be extended to the rest of the country, although the focus of their attention would remain on the capital where, he said, the bulk of illegal residents are concentrated.

"There is information that several of them are linked to international terrorist organisations," Gomelauri said.

For their part, human rights groups say they are determined to monitor further police operations. "The way this is being done proves once again that we are not living in a law-based state," Gia Bokeria of the Liberty Institute told IWPR.

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